

*This article is part of a translated collection published in 2023 by the Marie Goldsmith Project. These articles were translated by Alexandra Agranovich (Russian) and Christopher Coquard (French) and then edited by Christopher Coquard and Søren Hough with the goal of preserving Goldsmith's original meaning and stylistic emphases. Modern footnotes by the translator or editors are prefaced "Ed:" while all other footnotes are from Marie Goldsmith. This translation was originally published in [Black Flag Vol. 3 No. 2](#).*

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## **The Problems of Tomorrow: Part I — The Reasons for our “Maximalism”<sup>1</sup>**

By M. Isidine (Marie Goldsmith)<sup>2</sup>

July 15, 1919

Translated by Christopher Coquard

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The old question of *maximalism* and *minimalism* takes on a completely different aspect today than it did a few years ago. Half is due to a lack of faith in the realization of the socialist ideal in a tangible future, and half is for tactical reasons, the socialist parties having previously elaborated minimalistic compromises in the past making them the only real content of their platforms. Against this reformism, against this compromise, rose the anarchists, convinced that nothing can replace the whole ideal and that any fractionation of this necessarily total action can only harm it. And the conflict between these two points of view has filled the whole history of the socialist movement, from the International to the present.

But the situation has now been completely reversed, due to the revolutions that have broken out in the countries of Europe which, only a few years ago, were considered the least susceptible. The clearly social character of these revolutions indicates that the fall of bourgeois domination is no longer a subject of theoretical propaganda or historical predictions: it is tomorrow's reality. In Russia, in Austria, in Germany, the movement involves the great masses; it already terrifies the bourgeoisie of the countries that this contagion has not yet reached. Once again, the question of maximalism and minimalism arises. Among the militants of the socialist and trade unionist movement, some of them welcome with joy all the attempts at economic emancipation and strive to realize them; others stop, hesitating, in front of the enormity of the task to be accomplished and wonder if they will be up to the task; they would like to run away from this responsibility, preferring to choose some other opportune time for the movement. It seems to them that the masses are not yet ready, and they would like to gain even only a few more years to be better prepared. And for that, they may task themselves with giving the movement a calmer course, so that in the meantime they may work toward improvements of the workers' legislative rights within the existing system or for purely corporative struggles.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ed: Isidine, M. “Les problèmes de demain - I - Les raisons de notre « maximalisme » [The Problems of Tomorrow - I - The Reasons for our “Maximalism”].” *Les Temps nouveaux* [*The New Times*], July 15, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> Ed: Marie Goldsmith frequently wrote under pseudonyms. M. Isidine, or sometimes simply Isidine, was a common choice for the French anarchist press, along with M. Korn or M. Corn.

<sup>3</sup> Ed: “Corporative” is a term used to refer to a class-collaborationist economic and social system whereby key societal structures, such as banks, are organized into distinct bodies called “corporations” (not to be confused with the term corporation in modern capitalist society). Well after it was first proposed in the nineteenth century, this system was made popular when Benito Mussolini declared it a core plank of fascism.

In order to choose between these two conflicting points of view, it is not enough to let ourselves be guided by our revolutionary feelings, nor even by our devotion to the ideal. We have to look back to the lessons of History, we have to mitigate our feelings by criticism, we have to go back to the fundamental principles of our doctrine.

In resuming the publication of *Temps Nouveaux*, in the midst of these entirely changed conditions, we must, from the very outset, from our very first issue, give a clear answer to this vital question.<sup>4</sup> Our answer to this question will determine our stance on all future events to come.

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Let us remember our understanding of the process of all great social movements, a conception which is entirely different than that which inspires the parties who divide their objectives into ‘immediate’ and ‘final’ objectives.

How have the great movements of emancipation been carried out in the past? The struggle against the existing class order begins only among a small minority, which has acutely felt the oppression — and hopes to end it — more than others. Oppression weighs too heavily on this small minority to wait until enough of those in other social groups manage to free themselves mentally and enter into the struggle. The number of people from other classes who join the ranks of this first wave will not be considerable at first. But the revolutionary minority fights at its own risk and peril without worrying whether it is supported or followed by other classes. However, little by little, it begins to garner broad support; and this can be seen, if not in action, then at least intellectually in other classes. The courageous actions of some diminishes the fear of others; and so the spirit of revolt grows. We do not always understand well the goal pursued by those who revolt, but we do understand what they are fighting against, and this brings them sympathy. Finally, the moment comes when an event, sometimes insignificant in itself — for example, a determined act of violence or something more arbitrary — provokes a revolutionary explosion. The following events are propulsive, new experience is acquired every day, and in the midst of this intense agitation, the mindset of the public shifts greatly. The abyss between social classes narrows.

At the end of the revolutionary period — and this is true whether the revolution is victorious or defeated — the general mentality of the masses is raised to a level which all of the efforts of long years of patient propaganda had not been able to reach beforehand. The ideal of the revolutionary minority may not have been fully realized, but what has been realized (in deed or in mind) comes closer to it, and this all the more so because this minority had put more conviction and intransigence into its revolutionary activity. Whatever was achieved now becomes a piece of its heritage for future generations; the rest will be the duty of the next generation, new avenues to be conquered by new eras inaugurated by the revolution. A revolution is not only the conclusion of the evolutionary period that preceded it: it is also the starting point of the one that will follow, the one that will be devoted precisely to the realization of the ideas that, in the course of previous revolutions, could not find sufficient public support.

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<sup>4</sup> Ed: After *Les Temps Nouveaux* went out of print at the onset of World War I, the paper resumed printing in 1919 under the guidance of Jean Grave, Marc Pierrot, and Marie Goldsmith, and others.

Even when a revolution is defeated, the principles it proclaims never perish. Each revolution of the nineteenth century was defeated, but each was a step forward toward a broader victory. The revolution of 1848, which disappointed the hopes of the workers, definitively dug, in the days of June, an abyss between the workers and the republican bourgeoisie; it also stripped socialism of its mystical and religious character and attributed to it a realistic social movement.<sup>5</sup> The Paris Commune, drowned in blood, undermined the cult of statist centralization and proclaimed the universal principles of autonomy and federalism. And the Russian revolution? Whatever its future destiny, it will have proclaimed the fall of capitalist domination and championed the rights of labor; in a country where the state of oppression of the masses was more conducive to revolt than anywhere else, it proclaimed that it is these very masses who must henceforth be masters of their own lives. And whatever the future may hold, nothing can take this idea away from any future struggles: the reign of the contemporary owner classes is virtually over.

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It is these general considerations that will dictate the answer to the question: are the conditions ready yet for social revolution?

All debates on the question of whether the masses are “ready” or “not ready” are always tainted with error, whether they are pessimistic or optimistic. We have no way of ascertaining which factors could make a social milieu ready. And besides, how do we define “being ready”? Will we wait until the majority of the population has become socialist? But we know perfectly well that this is impossible under present conditions. If one could bring about by propaganda, by education alone, a radical transformation of the mind, of feelings and sentiments, of the whole mentality of humanity, why should one want a violent revolution, with all its sufferings? At whatever moment in history that one considers it, the mass is never “ready” for the future and it will never become so: a revolutionary event must occur beforehand. It is not in the power of revolutionaries to choose their moment beforehand, to prepare everything and to make the revolution explode according to their will, like fireworks.

Those who always consider the great movements premature generally support the point of view that the certain “objective historical conditions” are essential: i.e., the degree of capitalist evolution, the state of industry, the development of productive forms, etc... But they do not see that these dogmas evaporate before their eyes — as have their minimum programs — under the pressure of real life. The most convinced Marxists are now obliged to recognize the fact that the social revolution has begun, not in a country of advanced capitalism, but in a country that was very backward from this point of view and that is especially agricultural, and that, consequently, there are other factors at play for revolution than the development of productive forces. Moreover, if they really wanted to penetrate a little further into the substance of the question, they could have drawn this conclusion from Marxism itself, thus transforming it into its opposite: into a theory of active progression, achieved by the efforts of individual members of society. To corroborate this, we can find, in Marx, a precious sentence: “Humanity only ever asks itself riddles that it can solve.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if an ideal is conceived within a community, it is only because

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<sup>5</sup> Ed: The Revolutions of 1848 were a widespread set of European uprisings against monarchies. These revolutions popularized liberal and socialist ideas across the continent.

<sup>6</sup> Ed: This partial quote comes from the preface of Karl Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). The full quote concludes “...since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”

the necessary conditions for its realization are present. Continuing this train of thought, we will say that from this moment, from the moment when an ideal is formulated by the minority of the vanguard, its realization is only a question of the relationship between the forces at play: the past, which has achieved its task, and the inevitable future. Gradually, at the price of painful struggles and of innumerable sacrifices, the scale leans toward the future.

At present, after a centuries-long secular struggle for economic equality, after centuries-long secular propaganda of socialist ideas, we are now witnessing a bold attempt to achieve it. Our progress will still have its setbacks both in its struggle against the enemies and within our inner evolution, and we should not think that we will find ourselves tomorrow in an anarchist society such as we conceive it. However, we cannot achieve a better life without actively trying to reach it; experience is the only way forward, there is no other way. Instead of asking ourselves: are the conditions ripe? Are the masses ready? We should rather ask: *are we ready ourselves?* What practical measures can we propose in the aftermath of victory, for the realization of *our* socialism, of communism organizing itself without the help of, and against, any State interference? What are the measures that should be developed, and under what conditions should be studied beforehand and implemented?" This should be our greatest preoccupation; what we must do is not to fear being overtaken by events, but to actively prepare ourselves for them now, always remembering the truth that an ideal is realizable only to the extent that people believe in its possibility and devote their energy to it.